

Readings for the Second Sunday of Advent

10th December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her

that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,

make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,

and every mountain and hill be made low;

the uneven ground shall become level,

and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,

and all people shall see it together,

for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

A voice says, 'Cry out!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades,

when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;

surely the people are grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades;

but the word of our God will stand for ever.

Get you up to a high mountain,

O Zion, herald of good tidings;

lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,

lift it up, do not fear;

say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'

See, the Lord GOD comes with might,

and his arm rules for him;

his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;

he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom,

and gently lead the mother sheep.

Second Reading: 2 Peter 3:8-15a

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

Gospel: St Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

A Reflection for The Second Sunday of Advent

Do you suffer from compassion fatigue? That feeling of weariness that comes over us when yet more pictures of suffering come onto our screens and we feel helpless, especially perhaps at this time of year. We think of the approach to Christmas as a time for family, fun and good food. Aside from the fact that Christmas isn't like this for quite a lot of people in our own community and country, we don't want to think about the suffering of others; suffering that we, personally, can't do anything about. We switch channels or turn the page. If this describes you, you are not alone. I suspect that many of us do feel like this at times, even though we may be somewhat ashamed to admit it.

This year, it is the Holy Land, the very place where God chose to reveal himself to the world, which is filling our screens with horror, which is making me struggle a bit with Christmas and images of a peaceful stable scene. Some of you may have seen the image circulating on social media this week of a nativity scene outside a Lutheran Church in Bethlehem which shows Jesus dressed as a Palestinian baby amidst rubble. The usual Christmas celebrations have been cancelled in Bethlehem this year.

Today, on the second Sunday in Advent, we think about the prophets. In our Old Testament reading, we hear from Isaiah with his messages variously of warning, comfort and hope. In the first part of the book of Isaiah, chapters 1 to 39, the prophet foresaw the overthrow and destruction of Jerusalem and Judah by the Babylonians. In today's passage, from the beginning of chapter 40, that has now happened, and the prophet speaks of God's promises of restoration and hope. As he makes clear elsewhere, these are promises for all nations.

In words that may be more familiar to us from Handel's oratorio, *The Messiah*, the promise here is that God will comfort his people, that their penalty is paid and that it is time to prepare the way of the Lord. Despite the fragility and fallibility of humankind, who are like grass that withers and fades, God will feed his flock, gather his lambs and lead the mother sheep. Words full of hope.

But these are also words that we need to be careful with. In the context of the current situation in the Middle East, it is worth recognising that where Isaiah speaks of Jerusalem, or Zion, or the Holy City, as occurs three times in today's passage, it is not so much a reference to a specific place as a metaphor for what the book of Revelation refers to as the 'New Jerusalem', that eternal spiritual home for all God's people, from all the world, when God makes all things new. There is great danger in taking ancient words and interpreting them literally. It has been alarming to hear several people in the media say in recent weeks that the state of Israel believes that the land was given to them by God, as if this is some sort of justification for their actions in Gaza. It isn't.

Some Palestinians I have seen interviewed certainly believe that Israel wishes to drive them all out of the land. The Israeli government says that it is only trying to eliminate (and there's a chill in that word) Hamas. Of course, what Hamas did was abhorrent and cannot be condoned or excused in any way, and some of the details that have come out recently have also made us want to turn away. But Israel's response needs to be proportionate and NOT one that inflict so much destruction and loss of life on an innocent population. Recent history should tell them that it won't work, it won't achieve the security they long for. The efforts of western governments to destroy Al Qaeda in the wake of 9/11 failed and we ended up with IS. They may not be in the news at the moment but neither group has gone away. If this current conflict continues and drags in other groups and nations in the region, if new generations are radicalised, it will have an impact across the globe for decades. We need to pay attention - but for more than our own safety. As Christians, the suffering of others should always be our concern.

I wonder how Isaiah's words of comfort and hope to a desolate people seem in Gaza at present, innocent people who are paying a terrible penalty? Or in Israeli civilians, fearful of what might happen next. Maybe they do bring hope, something to cling to amidst the trauma; maybe they ring hollow. But preparing the way of the Lord is definitely not done with missiles and guns. As we heard in today's Gospel, John the Baptist came, the last in the tradition of Old Testament prophets, to prepare the way of the Lord by calling for repentance.

God is gracious and the reading from second letter of Peter reminds us that God is patient, wanting everyone to come to repentance. We probably appreciate that patience but, for the suffering of the world, I would understand if they wished that God would hurry up. Repentance is something the world is in desperate need of, and not only for the tragedy in the Holy Land.

Ukraine needs support to continue resisting the aggression of Russia, but other countries are wearying of the financial commitment. Many western nations demonise immigrants and strangers, and this week we have heard extraordinary

comments from some of our parliamentarians suggesting we are not being severe enough in limiting the human rights of refugees. Meanwhile, nations meet at COP 28 to try to find ways forward to address the climate crisis whilst many are still doing deals that will prolong the use of fossil fuels. How would we feel about these things if we were Ukrainian, or a refugee, or our ancestral land was disappearing under the sea?

Of course, we are not directly involved in making the decisions, but unfortunately we are all complicit. Such decisions are made on our behalf, whether or not we agree with them. And then there are those times when we do concur. The times when we agree there are too many refugees without stopping to consider the circumstances that cause many of them to flee their homes. The times when we moan about the cost of things, without remembering that for us to use less of everything would be for the benefit of the planet. The times when we want more of our taxes spent at home without remembering those whose homes and communities have been completely destroyed by war or environmental catastrophe.

So John the Baptist calls us to repentance. Repentance comes with a resolve to do better in the future in those things that are within our control, whether it is the way we vote, the choices we make or what we purchase. But repentance also comes with a desire to follow Isaiah, whose opening words today are also instructions, calling us to bring comfort, to speak tenderly, and to prepare the way of the Lord. One way we can do that is to try to imagine ourselves in the position of others. To recognise that, if we were living in Gaza, or a refugee fleeing persecution, or starvation through the effects of climate change, we would be glad that people weren't turning their backs on us, weren't suffering compassion fatigue and switching channels. In their position, even though we know that individuals far away can't change their situation, we would want others to recognise our plight and to add their voice to campaigns for change and peace.

Next time, when you see the suffering of others and you are tempted to turn away, or switch channels, instead take a moment to acknowledge their suffering as fellow human beings and offer a prayer on their behalf.